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ABSTRACT

John Dewey said, "Learning is thinking about experience". This dictum accurately reflects the rationale for outdoor activity as experiential education. The term "outdoor learning" refers to a set of activities which have the following characteristics in common: environmental contrast (a sharp environmental change for the participant); physical activity (e.g., hiking, rafting, technical rock climbing, etc.); the intentional use of stress as an intrinsic rather than contrived part of the situation (e.g., rough weather); small group context (focus on collaboration rather than competition); new knowledge and skills (emphasis on the challenge of newness and unfamiliarity). Major outdoor learning goals are: enhancing self concept; understanding the self, with special emphasis on the identification of one's strengths; a reorientation of attitudes toward aesthetic appreciation and environmental awareness; an understanding of leadership and followership and the use of authority; and internalization (insight, comprehension, and awareness that produce behavior changes). A well-designed outdoor learning experience typically follows a thaw-shift-freeze cycle; there is an early phase in which some aspects of conventional wisdom and behavior are called into question by being disconfirmed; a transition phase then offers insight into alternative behavior, or attitudes, or skills; finally, strategies are employed to stabilize the new behavior so that it may be retained over time. (JC)

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A RATIONALE FOR OUTDOOR ACTIVITY AS EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION: The Reason for Freezin'

A paper presented to the

Conference on Outdoor Pursuits in Higher Education
at
Appalachian State University
Boone, North Carolina

by

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February 11, 1974

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"Luther, you've got to put more of your weight on your legs. They're much stronger than your arms!" The instructor was talking to a fiftyish minister who was peering out from under a slightly too large climbing helmet at an over-hanging ledge directly above him. The climber was about three-fourths of the way up a granite face, located in an abandoned quarry on an island in Penobscot Bay. He had reached a point of impasse, and was clinging grimly to two handholds located just far enough apart so that he had to strain to reach them. Finally, after about fifteen minutes and two exhausting falls onto the belay rope, he was able to scramble around the obstacle. Shortly thereafter, gasping but triumphant, he pulled himself over the top of the climb.

At that point, the minister thought of the incident simply as a grueling but exhilarating physical experience. A few days later, however, while spending a period of time by himself during "solo," he had an opportunity to think again about his Morning on the Rock. Suddenly, he had a sense that his life back home bore some resemblance to the climbing experience. He realized that, time and again, he had gotten himself into difficult situations, from which there were at best only two ways out. Either he would admit failure and back away (although occasionally even admission of defeat provided no resolution), or he would muscle his way ahead at the cost of super-human effort. By itself, this flash of insight into a recurring pattern of behavior did not provide a remedy. But, if remediation is dependent upon understanding, the minister's heightened awareness of one of the dynamics in his own life is an increment of growth of fundamental significance.

The paper which follows represents a summary account of an effort to think through a systematic rationale for such a learning mode. By and large, it deals with outdoor education in terms of "what is," rather than in terms of "what might be" or "what should be." What I wish to describe with some care here presents that which is current practice already in a good many places. It is not contingent upon some further developments which have yet to happen.

At the same time, I do not mean to suggest that the rationale offered here is necessarily the only rationale or the best rationale. Clearly, there are other approaches to outdoor learning successfully being carried out, with different outcomes sought and differing rationales applied. I have made no comparisons in my own mind as I have prepared to write this paper, and I mean to suggest none.

Outdoor Learning

Using the above comments as a preliminary statement, let me begin to sharpen the focus and set some limits to the task at hand. When I use the term "outdoor learning," I refer to a large set of activities which have certain characteristics in common. What are these characteristics?

The common elements in the type of experience I wish to discuss are:

(a) environmental contrast;
(b) physical activity;
(c) the intentional use of stress;
(d) a small group context; and
(e) the employment of newly acquired knowledge and skills.

These elements require some explanation:

Environmental contrast - Typically, such contrast is obtained by shifting participants to a wild setting, on the assumption that such an environment presents a sharp change for most people. (Some experimentation has also been carried on in an inner city setting, with mixed results.)

Physical activity - The activities used tend to be complex, and to extend over a substantial period of time. Examples are: hiking, backpacking, horseback riding and packing, winter ski touring, boating, rafting and canoeing, technical rock climbing and mountaineering, and construction of trails and other facilities.

Stress - It is assumed that stress used in a controlled manner can have a high utility value for educational purposes. It is important,

of course, that exacting safety standards be observed. It is also important that the stress be an intrinsic part of the situation, rather than appearing to be contrived or synthetic. Stress resulting from being out in rough weather is an example of stress of the right kind.

Small group context - Success for the experience is not defined in terms of the individual. A task is not completed until every member of the group has contributed to its completion. A person does not "make it" in a solo effort, but rather as a contributor to a team. The aim is to stress collaboration rather than competition. The assumption is that most of us are already well schooled in the virtues of competitive effort, but that, at an operational level, we are relatively unskilled in cooperation and uninformed about inter-dependence.

New knowledge and skills - The factor which is underscored here is newness. The optimum case would be to place the group in a situation wholly unfamiliar to all of its members (*e.g.*, landlubbers in a pulling boat), and requiring skills and information not readily at hand.

What I have described above as elements common to outdoor learning, in fact are at the same time the means used toward the achievement of ends as yet unnamed. It is these themes which, when woven together, account for the impact of an activity in a wild setting upon the participants. To understand how this may be true, however, also requires an awareness of the purposes to be served. Hence, a brief discussion of these purposes follows.

To What Ends?

The goals I choose to emphasize as outcomes-hoped-for from outdoor learning tend to be abstract rather than concrete; subtle and complex rather than direct and uncomplicated; and rather more oriented toward future growth than immediate change. As I have listed them here, they tend also to shade from the general to the more-or-less specific. Be not misled by their intangible quality, however. They are of fundamental importance.

Most basic of all the purposes included here is that of enhancing self-concept. So central is this need that I would include it among the three or four most vital aims of all education. In their poignant book about the North Carolina Outward Bound School, To Know by Experience, Dan and Diane Meyer state that "perhaps the most important determinant of a person's future is self-concept." Clearly it has a lot to do with the present as well.

Self-esteem derives, of course, from understanding of self. Consequently, self-knowledge becomes for me the most general aim sought through outdoor learning. To the extent that the effort is successful, one acquires insight into both weaknesses and strengths. Because awareness of strengths contributes directly to a positive self-concept, I have become convinced that time spent in building upon one's strengths is used to far greater effect than time spent in trying to remedy weaknesses. (I do not mean to suggest that one should wholly ignore areas of weakness. However, it is an unavoidable aspect of human nature to worry about defects, even when one tries not to do so. Once they have been identified, there is little danger that one's faults will escape attention.) Exercising the positive aspects of one's personality is inherently a far more efficient process than painfully working through correctional measures. One can be confident and zestful if one is leading from strength, while the process of correcting faults is intrinsically dreary and slow.

In the domain of attitudes, I select two areas about which orientation shall be provided. One area is that of aesthetic appreciation; the other is that of environmental awareness. By aesthetic appreciation, I mean the valuing of harmony (or symmetry, or diversity, or contrast. . .) as one perceives it, through maximum utilization of senses as well as one's intellectual and emotional faculties. It has to do with awareness of one's response to an experience. It is the capacity to catch one's breath at beech shadows softly etched in snow by moonlight. It is also the incapacity to tolerate the random ugliness of billboard/neon light glare and steel factory/paper mill stench, with which we have been reared. By environmental awareness, I mean the realization that it is never possible to do just one thing, as Garrett Hardin

puts it.[1] It is the difference between the linear, incremental thinking of Newton, and the systemically connected thinking of Darwin.

In the domain of knowledge, I also choose to emphasize an understanding of only two areas. The first is that of leadership and followership; the second has to do with the use of authority and the nature of authority transactions. By the term leadership, I wish to refer to a highly demanding craft which involves coordinating and focusing the activities of individual people around some larger purpose that is socially significant. Followership refers to the acts of volition which enable a leader to lead. By authority, I mean one person causing another to act in a predetermined way, at the initiative of the first person and with the willing compliance of the second. It has to do with my accepting direction from you -- and you from me. I choose these two areas in part because they are important, in part because they invariably appear on the agenda of an outdoor learning experience. However one structures the experience, they are there. It is better to deal with them.

The final end sought is internalization. Insight, comprehension, awareness -- all are sterile if they produce no influence upon behavior. The intent, therefore, is to avoid facile manipulation of ideas in their verbal form, and to aim instead at connecting the idea -- which may well be an already familiar idea only superficially understood -- to an act.

In summary, then, the goals I have chosen for outdoor learning are the following:

A. Enhancing self-concept
B. Understanding the self, with special emphasis upon identifying one's strengths
C. In the domain of attitudes, a re-orientation toward
    1. aesthetic appreciation
    2. environmental awareness
D. In the domain of knowledge, an understanding of
    1. leadership and followership
    2. the use of authority
E. Internalization

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[1]Garrett Hardin, Exploring New Ethics for Survival: The Voyage of the Spaceship Beagle (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1972).

The trail turns at this point. (Notice the double blaze on that tree?) Let me pause, therefore, to remind you of where we have been and to foreshadow where I hope we shall go. Thus far, I have simply tried to clarify what I mean by outdoor education. I have also selected for emphasis certain goals to be achieved through this mode of learning. From here on, I propose to deal with the general question of why one should believe that utilization of such a format as is described above will move one toward achievement of these goals. It is this rationale which immediately follows.

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Why Outdoor Learning?

My rationale for outdoor activity as experiential education is based upon John Dewey's dictum that "Learning is thinking about experience." I believe not only that such a definition of learning is pedagogically sound, but also that learners -- particularly those of high school and college age -- respond more positively to an experiential framework for learning than to one which is largely verbal. Through this approach, the intent is to get from mere talking to actual doing as efficiently as possible. (In the process, much of the talking may well be short-circuited. Learning and talking are not synonomous.[2]) Students are drawn both by the perceived meaningfulness of experience, and by the absence of artificially contrived win-lose situations, which, in their view, characterize the traditional verbal approach.

More specifically, the rationale has to do with reducing the ambiguity of outcomes. Most persons sharply contract the scope of their attention when they move into a contrasting environment (*e.g.*, a wild setting). They tend to concentrate on such basic considerations as keeping warm, being safe, getting adequate food, providing for shelter, staying dry, and getting from point A to point B. There is a sharp reduction in the number and complexity of variables between one's normal

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[2]Neither are learning and experience synonomous, I hasten to acknowledge. Talk can be an experience which leads to significant learning -- but it often misfires.

environment and this "simplied" environment, as it is perceived.[3] In a conventional setting, one attempts to deal with hundreds of variables in a day; in the simplified context of meeting basic needs, the number of variables may be reduced to eight to twelve. As a result of this indirect form of exaggeration, outcomes in a wild setting are clearer and more easily understood. Cause-and-effect relationships are sharpened.

At the same time, when physical activity is being used as a vehicle for learning, the outcomes of one's behavior are made clearer, too. If one is responsible for anchoring a boat, it is quite obvious whether one goes aground in the night. Therefore, the consequences of behavior are much less ambiguous than they typically are in one's normal environment.

More specifically, it may become apparent that there is a discrepancy between one's "virtual"[4] self-image in a complex environment -- subject to rationalization as it it -- and one's "real"[4] self-image as perceived in a simplified environment. Given this greater clarity about one's behavior, one has an opportunity to modify it -- if one chooses to do so.

A well-designed outdoor learning experience typically follows a thaw --> shift --> freeze cycle,[5] which is very compatible with this phenomenon of reducing ambiguity. There is an early phase in which some aspects of conventional wisdom and conventional

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[3]A wild setting is, of course, no less complicated an environment than any other. It is the contraction of one's scope of attention that causes it to appear as a simplified environment.

[4]Use is made of the terms "virtual" and "real" here in an effort to develop a metaphor, comparing the situation being discussed with certain optical phenomena that apply to lenses and mirrors. A real image (obtained, say, by refracting light through a double convex lens) can be projected upon a screen, if the screen is placed where the image appears to be located. This is not true for a virtual image (obtained, perhaps, by reflecting light from a plane mirror).

[5]For this concept -- and a good many others -- I am indebted to John Rhoades' dissertation entitled The Problem of Individual Change in Outward Bound (University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1972). The model originated with Kurt Lewin and Edgar Schein.

behavior patterns are called into question by being disconfirmed. For example, it might be suggested that running in a group is not necessarily a competitive exercise. Or one may need to learn the danger of sweating in sub-zero weather. The process of re-examining one's routine assumptions is helped substantially when one is involved in situations requiring new skills and new knowledge. The situation itself tends to reinforce negatively one's customary patterns of response. Having established readiness in this way, a transition phase then offers insight into alternative behavior -- or attitudes, or skills. It is at this point that time for reflection is particularly useful. Having experienced the results of one's typical response pattern, and having glimpsed some fresh options, one needs to decide whether to modify one's customary behavior. Still later, strategies must be employed to stabilize the new behavior so that it may be retained over time. This final phase can, and probably should, extend well beyond the formal termination of the learning experience.

It should be mentioned here that achieving transfer through the conscious use of analogy and metaphor is a powerful tool to be used in facilitating the retention of changed behavior during this third phase. There are persons who develop unusual facility in creating puns, a play on words. By doing so, they are able to put a word or phrase in a unique light. In a similar spirit of playfulness, it is possible to develop a facility for transferring insights relating to human interaction from the simplified environment back into one's normal setting through the use of generalization and analogy. A simple example would be to draw a comparison between the specific responsibility of the skipper of a boat when sailing close to a lee shore, and that general aspect of leadership which requires a leader to analyze and define a situation. It is, I believe, readily possible to train idividuals in the use of this creative skill. Once acquired, facility in building analogies can become enormously useful.

There is one particular area of transfer which is of special interest. It has to do with the body as an aspect of self, on the one hand, and the total self, on the other. To a remarkable degree, it appears to me to be true that what one thinks and feels about one's

entire self is greatly influenced by what one thinks and feels about one's body. There is a small but growing quantity of research which supports this point of view.[6] If this is the case, one obvious and very direct strategy for strengthening self-concept is to enable people to have success experiences with their bodies.[7] If I can manage successfully to rappel down that rock face -- a maneuver that at first struck me as being impossible -- perhaps I can successfully negotiate other difficult experiences in my life!

A further point having to do with the growth of self emphasizes the importance of interaction between the self and others. Among modern psychologists, there is now widespread agreement upon the principle that the self is defined, nurtured, and maintained -- to whatever extent these functions may occur -- largely by means of interaction with other individuals. I learn to know who and what I am partly by observing -- through imaginary detachment -- myself engage in transactions with you, and partly by interpreting your reactions to me. Hence, the vital importance of the small group context for outdoor learning becomes clear. Growth in self-concept and self-understanding are contingent upon interaction with others.

Lastly, it is necessary to comment on the utility of stress used intentionally as an educational tool, particularly as to the relationship between stress and the goal of internalization. It is my belief that stress can be employed in three slightly different ways: (a) It can function as a catalyst in the early stage of the thaw --→ shift --→ freeze cycle to stimulate a desire to change. If I become hopelessly lost in a fog during a tow-out drill,[8] my uncertainty as to the need

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[6]Seymour Fisher, "Experiencing Your Body: You Are What You Feel," Saturday Review, July 8, 1972, pp. 27-32.

[7]This strategy appears particularly appropriate for persons who are handicapped -- whether physically, mentally, or emotionally -- and who, therefore, have some reason to believe that "God short-suited them in their issue."

[8]As used in some sea schools, a tow-out drill is an exercise in which a pulling boat is towed out 2-3 miles from its mooring into a dense fog bank. After executing a few figure eights to insure disorientation, the occupants of the boat are cast adrift and instructed to return to the mooring on their own.

for navigational skills suddenly vanishes. (b) It can function as a motivator for internalizing new behavior. If, later in the cycle of the learning experience, I again encounter fog, but this time not during a drill, I have a second chance to learn whether I really understand and can apply navigational skills. I may then realize that verbal mastery does not suffice. To be of value, the skills must be available for use. (c) It can function as a self-checking device to ascertain whether new behavior has been internalized. I probably need at least a third experience in fog before I can be confident that I am able to serve reliably as a navigator. Stress, then -- when it is understandable and, in a sense, controlled -- can be a versatile and potent tool in the kit of the experiential educator.

Conclusion

In the preceding statement, I have begun by describing the themes which I choose to include in outdoor learning experiences. It becomes apparent that these themes are means employed toward the achievement of ends. Hence, an elaboration of the ends follows. Turning next to the important question of "Why outdoor learning?" a rationale for this type of experiential education is built around the points of connection between means and ends. To the extent that the argument succeeds, it demonstrates the kind of relationship suggested by the model "If you do A and B, then X, Y, and Z can be made to occur."

So dispassionate a summary, however, offers some danger of missing the whole point. Outdoor education, as experienced by Luther in our initial anecdote, is often a vibrant encounter with one's fundamental self that leaves the learner exhilarated and deeply joyful. -- But enough of talk. You must try it!

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